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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000759

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/RA, DRL AND G/TIP

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TAGS: PREL ELAB KTIP MU

SUBJECT: ILO POSITIVE ABOUT PROGRESS ON LABOR UNIONS AND ANTI-TRAFFICKING IN OMAN

REF: MUSCAT 625

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo for reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: According to International Labor Organization (ILO) representatives conducting training in Oman, the new Minister of Manpower is solidly behind efforts against Trafficking in Persons (TIP) and is in support of labor unions. As part of the ILO labor inspector training, Omanis are specifically being taught to identify victims of TIP. The reps were effusive in their praise of Oman's efforts to address TIP and to improve the conditions for workers in the country, especially in comparison to Oman's Gulf neighbors. ILO contacts further report that the long-postponed conference of the General Federation of Workers, that will elect national union leadership for Oman, is scheduled for January 27-28, 2009. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In an October 18 meeting and follow-up phone call, ILO representatives Wael Issa and Khawla Mattar told poloff that they were very encouraged by Oman's work in both the area of labor rights and TIP. During their two-day visit to Oman, they met with representatives from labor, business and the government, including the new Minister of Manpower, Shaikh Abdullah Al-Bakri.

Trafficking in Persons

¶3. (C) Mattar stated that during her last training visit to Oman in August, she had remained an extra day at the request of the previous Manpower Minister to conduct anti-TIP training for the heads of all units at his Ministry (reftel).

She confirmed that the Ministry of Manpower (MoM) asked the ILO to do additional anti-TIP training for Omani judges and the Royal Oman Police (ROP) in the future. However, Mattar said that the ILO would be unable to provide further anti-TIP training out of its current grant, and will accordingly look for additional sources of funding to cover this request.

(Note: The Dutch Ambassador to Oman has told us that he has money to spend on a human rights related issue; post will attempt to steer him to the ILO. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Mattar and Issa further explained the type of anti-TIP training they conducted during the ILO's on-going program for new Omani labor inspectors. This training included teaching inspectors to identify possible trafficking victims at each work place inspected using a process that incorporates reviewing bank reports and salary slips and speaking privately with individual workers. The MoM has requested additional anti-TIP training for the inspectors to reinforce and follow-up on this instruction. The MoM is also considering conducting joint labor inspections with the ROP in order to facilitate action against labor law violations.

¶5. (C) The ILO reps were very positive about Oman's

commitment to further combat trafficking. Both noted that compared to other countries in the region, such as Qatar, UAE and Bahrain, the Omanis genuinely want to improve the situation for workers in Oman, not just put on "window dressing to fool the international community." They commented that sometimes the Omanis move more slowly than their neighbors because they want to make sure that the laws and processes they create can actually be implemented effectively and have an impact on the problem.

Labor Unions

¶6. (C) Mattar said that the new dates for the national conference of the General Federation of Workers of the Sultanate of Oman (General Federation) that will elect its new leadership are January 27-28, 2009. Although these dates have repeatedly slipped (the last proposed time frame was the end of October), both Mattar and Issa thought that this time the conference and election would actually happen as scheduled. They noted that this is the first occasion that specific dates have been proposed, and that the overall structure for planning the conference is much farther along than in the past. Mattar said that the Omanis are meeting in committees to work on conference-related issues, sometimes until 8:00 in the evening. (Note: The workday usually ends at 2 or 3 pm for government employees in Oman. End Note.) They further remarked that the Omanis were motivated to conclude the election before the Arab Labor Conference in February 2009.

¶7. (C) According to Mattar, the General Federation currently

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occupies rented premises and has very limited financial resources. In response to a letter to Sultan Qaboos from the Ministry of Manpower highlighting the need for assistance for the national workers' group, the Sultan donated both land and money. Mattar and Issa reported that the General Federation plans to build a rental facility on the land in an effort to become financially self-sustaining.

¶8. (C) Mattar and Issa described their meeting with the new Minister of Manpower as very positive. They said that al-Bakri appeared committed to continuing to move forward on labor issues as quickly as possible. Employer groups, on the other hand, were still the most hesitant part of the tripartite labor relationship. The ILO intended to continue to work with employers to encourage them to view unions and discussions with them as the "high road" to competitiveness and productivity. Mattar and Issa encouraged the Embassy to remain engaged with the local business community on the topic of unions to help change anti-union attitudes.

¶9. (C) The ILO has no more programming scheduled in Oman until after the General Federation conference in February. Mattar stated that the Norwegians may have funds to promote labor programs and training in Oman and suggested that potential donors sit down together to create an overall plan as the Omanis "can only handle so much". The ILO representatives claimed that Oman was receiving pressure from other Gulf countries to slow down its labor reforms. According to Mattar, these countries were concerned that Oman's progress would reflect negatively on their own progress (or lack thereof).

¶10. (C) Comment. The news from the ILO on the continued strong interest of the Government of Oman to address TIP issues is encouraging and correlates with other information we have received. While the seemingly firm dates for the General Federation conference is also a positive development, particularly as the elections will pave the way for the Solidarity Center to begin MEPI-funded programming in Oman, post remains wary given past postponements. End Comment.

GRAPPO